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ABSTRACT

A four-phase longitudinal study was undertaken to examine the relationship between literacy education and employment. Phase 1 focused on trends in Canadian legislation and the labor market and student and teacher attitudes toward the legislative changes. In phase 2, an ethnographic approach was used to identify the educational and employment experiences of seven adult literacy students from Manitoba who were selected to represent a mix of ages, genders, literacy levels, family situations, and racial backgrounds. Life histories of the individuals were compiled that focused on the following: life goals, barriers to returning to school, work expectations, personal problems, and available supports. The study's overall conclusion at the end of year 2 was that, although literacy education offers personal, social, and economic benefits to individuals and society as a whole, literacy is not a "quick fix." There are also personal and structural barriers to learning and employment. The seven adults will be tracked further in phase 3, and the research findings and recommendations will be applied in phase 4. (Appended are demographic data about the case study participants and definitions of stage 1, 2, and 3 learners. The document contains 78 references. Addresses and phone numbers of seven Canadian literacy-related organizations conclude the document.) (MN)

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ED 460 273

Literacy, Welfare & Work:

YEAR II

A Case Study of the Lives of Seven Adult Learners

CE 078 778

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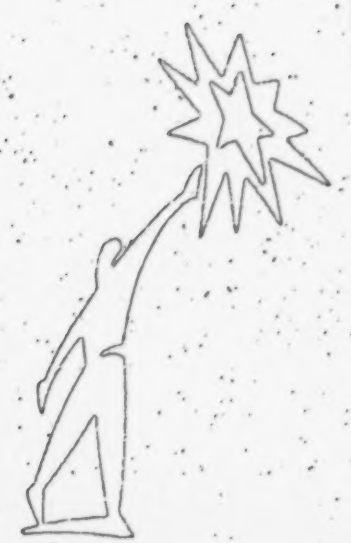
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

"The value of education is that you have more knowledge, and it will show in the way you talk and act. You can talk about mature things. The way I see it, education gives you skills, more to think about. It teaches you what is needed in the work force. I think of it as a need; like life. It's a basic need." (Student)



Literacy, Welfare, & Work

Year II Report

Written and researched by
Janet Smith
Common Ground Consulting

October 1998

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with funding from the National Literacy Secretariat
(Human Resources Development Canada).

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Finally, I wish to thank the literacy students who have shared their life stories with me over the past ten months and who have taught me valuable lessons about perseverance and hope. For that I am deeply grateful.

Janet Smith

Janet Smith

Brandon, Manitoba
October, 1998

Executive Summary

This report represents Year II of a 4-year study on the complex relationship between literacy education and employment. The *Literacy, Welfare & Work Longitudinal Research Project* is about giving voice to the experiences of adult learners and instructors. It places literacy students and instructors at the centre of the analysis, attempting to link their individual and collective experiences to a larger socioeconomic and political framework.

The research was initiated by members of the Coalition for Brandon Literacy Services (CBLS) and carried out by research consultant, Janet Smith. Funding for the project was provided by the National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources Development Canada. The study arose from the literacy community's need to better understand and respond to some of the changes resulting from recent government Welfare Reform measures: specifically the move toward linking literacy more closely with employment outcomes. These welfare-to-work strategies have placed an increased focus on employment outcomes for social assistance clients. This in turn has affected literacy programming and the lives of the students themselves. Some literacy instructors, for example, have noticed fewer students coming through their doors, as well as a change in the profile of their students. Some learners have had their funding reduced to a one-year only period. Others seem to have been unaffected by the changes.

Literacy education has always been concerned with helping people develop the skills and knowledge they need in order to gain independence. We know that education plays a key role in employability and that literacy programming provides an important stepping stone to further education and ultimately, employment. However, our research has also shown that a number of personal and systemic barriers often get in the way of a person's ability to find and keep a job. By examining students' life histories over time, the *Literacy, Welfare and Work Longitudinal Research Project* is beginning to identify some of the more subtle and often complex connections between literacy and poverty, abuse, poor health, etc., and how these issues can affect a person's ability to become fully employed. We are also learning about some of the supports, programs, and policies that best enable adult learners to achieve self-sufficiency.

The *Literacy, Welfare, and Work Longitudinal Research Project* is holistic in its perspective and action-oriented in approach. Our aim is to use the research to affect public policy so that adult learners can fully realize their educational and employment goals. Our hope is that *LWW* will have positive, practical applications for the literacy community, students, and policy-makers alike.

Introduction

A significant number of students in adult literacy programs identify their primary goal as finding a job. Literacy programs, in turn, have always attempted to meet student-defined needs, whether they be academic, employment-related or personal. Recent government welfare-to-work strategies however, have placed an increased focus on employment outcomes for social assistance clients, many of whom have traditionally been enrolled in literacy programs.

These changes to welfare policies are a product of the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST), which replaced the federally-funded Canada Assistance Plan,or CAP, in 1996. CAP was responsible for funding the provinces for social assistance, health and post-secondary education on a cost-shared basis. The CHST, on the other hand, now combines health care, post-secondary education and welfare payments to the provinces as block funding. CHST transfers to the province of Manitoba were reduced by approximately 160 million in 1996/97.[1]

Provincial governments reponded to these changes in a variety of ways. In Manitoba, they included reductions in welfare rates for single parent families by 2%, and up to 10% for employable single persons and couples without children. Bill C-36 also removed a previous clause that ensured the legal obligation to provide social assistance benefits to those in need. This same bill toughened employability requirements for clients, insisting that individual case plans be developed for participation in employment and/or training programs. Benefits can be cut if case plans are not followed.[2] Adapting to these Welfare Reforms has been challenging for both literacy students and instructors.

Early in 1996 the Coalition for Brandon Literacy Services met to discuss the changes that instructors were seeing within their own adult up-grading programs. Coalition members felt that the literacy community didn't have the information it needed to respond to this new focus in literacy programming. They wanted to better understand the new socioeconomic and political context within which they were working, as well as to document how students and programs were being affected by the changes. The Coalition also felt it was important to identify the impact on student employability that literacy programs provide, and to document the many complex factors that affect students' abilities to find and keep a job. The *Literacy, Welfare and Work Longitudinal Research Project (LWW)* was thus conceived. The Coalition obtained funding from the National Literacy Secretariat and hired a researcher to carry out the work.

1 *Federal CAP transfers to the Province of Manitoba in 1995/96 equalled $767,376,065 million. In 1996/97, under the CHST, transfer payments equalled $507,139,400 million, a reduction of approximately $260 million. However, the federal government then provided the Province of Manitoba (considered one of the "have-not" provinces) with equalization payments of $100 million. (Source: Public Accounts of Manitoba: Dept. of Finance, Government of Manitoba).*

2 *"Monitoring the Impacts on social Assistance Recipients of Welfare Cuts and Changes: An Overview"* National Anti-Poverty Organization: 1996, p. 6

Goals of the study

The *Literacy, Welfare and Work Longitudinal Research Project* (LWW) is a multi-phase study of the complex relationship between literacy and employment, within the context of Welfare Reform. The project is producing valuable qualitative and quantitative data on education and employment, and the kinds of policies and programs that best enable adult learners to achieve self-sufficiency. The focus of the study is to identify the barriers that students encounter, as well as the supports they require in moving from welfare to work.

LWW is divided into 4 yearly phases. Each phase builds upon the knowledge gained in the preceding year. The following is a brief overview of each phase of the project:

In Phase I (1996-97), the Coalition for Brandon Literacy Services produced a *Preliminary Study* that examined trends in welfare legislation and the labour market, and explored the perceptions and experiences of a select number of literacy students and instructors in relation to these changes.[3] A number of key issues were highlighted during this exploratory phase, including the identification of personal and structural barriers that get in the way of students' abilities to find and maintain employment (see next section: Phase One Highlights). These issues became the framework for more extensive research into the literacy and employment question.

This year, (Phase II: 1997-98) CBLS began tracking a group of seven individual students, with a view to better understand their experiences with education and employment. A small group was selected and, over a 10 month period, a detailed life history was compiled on each person. By examining students' lives over time, the research has begun to identify some of the more subtle and often complex connections between literacy and poverty, abuse, poor health, etc. and how these issues affect a person's ability to become gainfully employed.

In Phase III (1998-99), the research will continue to track case study participants, as they seek employment and/or continue their education. Their life histories will be cross-checked, compared, verified, or extended (a process known as triangulation) with the stories of other adult learners from two other target populations: *graduates of literacy programs*, and those *who have not been able to access literacy education for a variety of reasons*. This process will enable us to check the information of a relatively small target population against the perceptions of a larger group, and will move toward building a sound theoretical framework and action plan. Focus groups will also be held with employers, economists and other experts to determine local labour market issues, and with literacy workers to discuss programming and policy recommendations.

The final phase of the project (Phase IV: 1999-2000), will be dedicated to *applying the research findings and recommendations*. A comprehensive Final Report will be produced, followed by a series of workshops that will bring literacy students, adult educators and policy-makers together to help make programs more accessible and meet the changing needs of the literacy community.

3 The report, *Literacy, Welfare and Work: A Preliminary Study* is available on the internet. Go to: http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/title.htm. The report can also be purchased from Literacy Services of Canada. See page 38 for details.

Highlights from Phase I:
LWW Preliminary Study

The *Literacy, Welfare, and Work Preliminary Study* was intended as a "first look" at the complex relationship between literacy and employment. It identified some key questions and issues as defined by literacy practitioners, students, and other key informants, and reviewed pertinent data related to adult education, the labour market, and welfare legislation. While the small sample population made definitive statements and recommendations impossible, an analysis was made of some of the emerging trends. The following is a brief synopsis of the report's observations and conclusions:

- **Education level is a very important factor in realizing employment goals and alleviating poverty:**

Literacy instructors and students recognize that education is a crucial step to finding employment and breaking out of poverty

People with literacy problems tend to be the most marginalized members of society. In Canada, lower literate adults have " 2/3 the income of other Canadians, are twice as likely to be unemployed, and many times more likely to receive some form of social assistance. Jobs available to lower literacy adult tend to be the lowest paid, and the most insecure" (*NAPO Facts*.National Anti-Poverty Organization. October, 1992). Indeed, limited reading, writing and math skills mean fewer opportunities for employment. In today's "high-tech", information-based economy, literacy skills are essential. Even manual and service sector jobs often require a Grade 12 education. The recent International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) summarizes the changes to the so-called "new economy" in this way:

> *"The emerging economy changes both the expectations and demands on the population. In this new context, information is abundant. Those lacking the skills and opportunities to access, organize and use this information in novel ways are at a disadvantage."*
> (IALS Report: Statistics Canada: 1995, p. 23)

Literacy programs provide important opportunities for growth, both personal and academic. These skills in turn increase students' abilities to find and keep a job and to become more self-sufficient.

> *"Students are constantly told that until they get properly educated they will not find work other than the menial dishwasher or burger-slinging jobs. Literacy increases their chances of being able to find more meaningful work. This happens not only through increasing their academic skills, but also their interpersonal and social skills." (Instructor interview)*

> *"I feel its important for us to educated. When I went out there trying to get a job I became really down and my self-esteem got worse. I thought: 'Nobody wants me. I'm useless.' So, I really found that coming to these literacy classes made a big difference." (Student interview)*

- **A number of barriers exist for students moving from welfare to work:**

Instructors and students are keenly aware of the importance of education in making the transition from welfare to work. However, they also realize that a number of personal and structural barriers make this shift very difficult. Barriers to education and employment include: poverty, family violence, poor health, lack of housing and childcare, racism, and other forms of discrimination. In order to overcome these difficulties, students need sufficient time and support services which, in many cases, are lacking.

> *"I find the issues with my students are life issues like child care, substance abuse issues, living in abusive relationships... They're not ready until those things are dealt with. No matter how nice their resumé looks, they may get a job but they'll never keep it. I think there has to be a way to build in those kinds of supports and opportunities for people to get their life under control." (Instructor interview)*

"Literacy is usually only one of the many problems for learners, with poverty, racism and other forms of systemic injustice being the greatest obstacles to a better life".

- from 'Literacy and Poverty a View From the Inside' National Anti-Poverty Organization, 1992

- **The relationship between education and work is complex:**

Researchers also warn us that the links between literacy and employment are complex and cannot be dealt with in a reductionist manner (i.e literacy=work). The labour market situation is constantly changing and, while the "new economy" promises more jobs in the future, there is evidence that many of these jobs are part-time and low waged, so that many people are still being left out of the employment picture. It has been noted that no amount of education and training will solve the problem of a lack of jobs.[4]

> *"Canada's job market is less able now than it was a decade ago to offer economic security to people in low-income families, many of whom already work. The reasons are familiar: too few jobs and low wages in many of the jobs the poor hold." ("Private Sector Tackles Jobs". Brandon Sun: May 17, 1997)*

"No amount of education and training will solve the problem of a lack of jobs."

- **More information on welfare legislation and the labour market is needed. Students and instructors require better employment support services and resources:**

Literacy workers seem to understand that, under the new welfare legislation, they will be required to take on a greater role in preparing students for the workforce. Most are willing to take on the challenge. However, instructors recognize that the economic situation is difficult and that labour market issues are constantly changing.

Both students and instructors voiced the need for more *current information* on changes to the welfare reform act and labour market trends. They also require *support services* and other resources that will help students make the transition from welfare to *real* work opportunities.

> *"I think the only information we've had (about Welfare Reform) has been a few discussions with other literacy workers. The changes affect all of our literacy programs and clients, but without having the actual physical legislation to say that this is the new law... we haven't personally received anything." (Instructor interview)*

4 (D'Amico, Debbie: "The Emperor's New Jobs: Welfare Reform, Unemployment, and Education Policy", *Urban Anthropology*, Vol. 25, No. 2)

"I would like more training. There are lots of areas where I feel confident; for example, teaching resumé-writing and that kind of thing. But as far as how to access hidden job markets and that... we need more instruction in that area." (Instructor interview).

· In this changing climate, more dialogue and flexibility is required:

Literacy workers and other adult educators must engage in *on-going, positive, dialogue* with policy-makers and program staff from the various funding agencies (eg. Band offices, Income Assistance departments, and Human Resource Development Centres). This includes creating opportunities to share information and come to agreements on what is best for students.

· Student participation in decision-making is a must:

It is equally important that the *students themselves* be listened to. All too often, policies and programs are developed without clients' full input and participation. This report has shown that the majority of students in literacy programs demonstrate a strong commitment to learning, a keen understanding of the issues that affect their lives, and a willingness to become involved in making positive choices for themselves and their families. Involving them in the decision-making process can only contribute to the success of future programming.

LWW (Phase II)
Research Goals and Methodology

The *Preliminary Study* served as a spring-board for a more comprehensive analysis of the relationship between literacy and employment. The goal of Phase II of the *Literacy, Welfare & Work* project was to deepen our understanding of the issues raised in the Preliminary Study, by actually tracking a group of literacy students over time and learning about their lives. A major focus of this second phase was to look at the personal and structural *barriers* experienced by adult learners, as well as the *supports* they need in order to achieve self-sufficiency.

Need for the research

An in-depth case study approach would enable us to gather information about the complex and often subtle ways that literacy education enhances people's lives and, in turn, their ability to find and keep a job.

While a significant number of students in adult literacy programs identify their primary goal as finding a job, there are currently few mechanisms in place to track these students longitudinally (before, during, and after their participation in literacy programs), and to evaluate the role that literacy education plays in employment. Given the changes to federal and provincial welfare legislation with its emphasis on welfare-to-work, it is incumbent upon the literacy field to identify the impact of participation in literacy programs on student employability.

A review of current literature revealed that few, if any, longitudinal studies have been conducted regarding the relationship between literacy education and employment in Canada. It was felt that an in-depth case study approach would enable us to gather information about the complex and often subtle ways that literacy education enhances people's lives and, in turn, their ability to find and keep a job.

> *"Most descriptions of literacy use in adult life come from survey research, which describes daily reading and writing tasks by amount, kind, purpose, sex, age, and profession. Case study research of adult writing and reading is not common, nor is qualitative research of adult literates in context. I found ethnographic descriptions literacy to be the only studies that mirrored the complexity of the process." (Neilsen: 1989, p. 6)*

Methodology

The *LWW* case study set out to gather the life histories of a small group of adult learners, hoping to glean information that would place their literacy training within the holistic context of their overall life experience. The study used *ethnographic techniques* such as individual interviews, focus group sessions, and observation of the participants in a variety of settings (home, work, classroom etc.) in order to gather as much information about the way participants live, what they think, and how they feel about their educational and employment history.

Ethnography is the most basic of social science methods. It can be described as the "art and science of describing a group or culture" (Fetterman: 1989, p. 11), and has its roots in cultural anthropology. Once utilized as a solely descriptive method of categorizing patterns of behaviour and belief systems of "exotic" folk cultures, ethnography has evolved to include the observation, description and analysis of various social groups within the researcher's own

"Not only does (ethnography) have a very long history but it also bears a close resemblance to the routine ways in which people make sense of the world... The ethnographer participates, either overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions; in fact collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues with which he or she is concerned" (Atkinson: 1989, p. 2).

culture. For example, ethnographic accounts have been conducted with gang members in specific neighbourhoods, check-out operators, and residents of senior citizen homes.

Ethnographic methods can follow either a basic or applied approach. The basic approach focuses on the collection of data and development of theories, primarily for academic purposes. Applied ethnographic research, such as the *LWW* study, is usually funded by sponsors who are interested in understanding and/or solving a particular issue or question. These studies are often narrower in scope than basic ethnographic research, due to limitations of time and resources.

Ethnography does not subscribe to one particular theory or theories but rather seeks to enhance our understanding of a specific group of people over time and in a particular setting. It recognizes that human behaviour is extremely complex and varied, and is largely a product of one's environment. This is not to say that the researcher remains completely neutral or starts with a blank theoretical slate, but rather that he or she is open to follow leads and interpret data in many different ways. By actively observing, interviewing, taking notes, and analysing secondary data the *LWW* study is contributing to the development of theories which can then be tested and/or applied to resolve a particular problem or issue.

> *"Ethnographic research is not nomothetic science; it does not attempt to find truths or laws from which we can make predictions about future behaviour. Instead, it attempts to find meaning, to search for and describe ways in which people make sense of their world." (Neilsen: 1989, p. 123)*

Fieldwork is the most basic element of ethnographic research. It requires the researcher to be present in people's lives, to watch, record, and make sense of their actions and their words. As previously mentioned, limitations faced by applied studies make it impossible for the researcher to employ full ethnographic techniques and to "be there" all of the time. For this reason, *LWW* chose to compile *life histories* of the study participants, using a combination of individual and group interviews, and participant observation.

In this study, literacy is not seen as separate from people's everyday lives. Rather, literacy is defined as the way in which people find meaning and interact in the world.

Recording life histories enables the ethnographer to place the lived experiences and perceptions of individuals into some sort of chronological setting, as well as to better understand how those experiences have shaped their behavior and perceptions about education and work. This approach also validates students' stories, turning "statistics" into an understanding of real people's lives.

In this study, literacy is not seen as separate from people's everyday lives. Rather, literacy is defined as the way in which people find meaning and interact in the world. In her ethnographic account of the lives of 3 adults in Nova Scotia, Lori Nielsen described her role as ethnographer, and her definition of literacy, in this way:

> *"As an ethnographer, I had to be true to the way these people see the world. My task was to understand who these people are. I had to track them daily to understand the stories of their lives, and I had to probe into the past to see the roots of their literacy. I had to talk to them about their goals, their dreams, and their experiences. Because I believe literacy is not a skill that we acquire but is a reflection and creation of who we are, my findings show these people in a process of living...*

"I see literacy as a process of learning to be at home in the world. Most specifically, its a process of learning to read the signs that are critical for participating in various contexts. In many ways, I am describing a process of enculturation; in doing so, I am stretching a definition of literacy that normally refers only to the ability to read and write words on the page. I challenge this limited definition knowingly, and extend it to include the ways in which people write and read their lives"
(*Literacy and Living* 1989, p. 2).

The life histories of the individuals in the *LWW* study followed much the same approach, albeit in a more limited way. It was impossible, for example, to track students on a daily basis. Rather, the seven case study participants took part in numerous individual taped interviews over the course of ten months, as well as two focus group interviews. They also agreed to be observed in the classroom and in a variety of settings.

Interviews were structured to follow a chronological life cycle: early years, adolescence and adulthood, eliciting information on the participants' experiences during these phases of their lives. The researcher went into each interview with a list of issues to be discussed, and used open-ended questions to trigger discussion. At times, informants seemed to "go off on a tangent", requiring the researcher to change the original line of questioning and follow what the student really wished to talk about. Other times, more directive interviewing techniques were employed to ensure that certain topics were covered. Active listening and flexibility were the cornerstones of a good interview.

The themes that emerged from the interviews were grouped into 8 main areas: childhood and family experiences, school, reasons for dropping out of school, the effects of lower literacy on their lives, when and why they returned to school, barriers to going back or staying in school, the importance of education in their lives, and the supports they are currently receiving or would like to receive. An attempt was made to gather information about students' past and/or current employment history and the role that literacy training has played in their ability to find and keep a job. The latter information was sketchy at this stage, as most students were concentrating on their education and not engaging in serious job-seeking activities. More extensive ethnographic data on employment will be collected in Year III.

Study limitations

It has been noted that most applied ethnographic research is conducted under restrictions of time and financial resources, as well as attention to and respect for the limitations set by the target group. In the *Literacy, Welfare and Work* study, observation and interviews had to be conducted within a specific time frame and under contract deadlines. Students themselves were not always available or interested in being interviewed regularly. Several of them dropped out of sight for long periods of time during the research, and others decided not to continue their participation for various reasons.

The original target group for *LWW* was students on social assistance, representing a cross-section of Brandon literacy programs. However, two of the three literacy programs approached were unable to accommodate the time and resources required to be involved. The one remaining program was interested in being the site host, but had very few students who met the

criteria of being of social assistance recipients. It was decided that the research should proceed with the resources and people available at the time, and that the target group issue would in fact pose a new and interesting question to investigate.

Another initial concern for the research committee was the small number of students under study. It was felt that they might not reflect the diversity of experiences and opinions of the general adult literacy population. However, working with small numbers is a common ethnographic practice, where the choice is made for depth of analysis over breadth[5]. In addition, by comparing the case study group with other students, a good triangulation of data will be obtained. In the end, one instructor summed it up in this way: "Everything I read in these stories I have heard time and time again. What Leslie said, for example; it's not just one person speaking. She reflects the stories of 20 other students I know."

While these limitations posed some dilemmas and initial set-backs for *LWW*, we were able to adapt to the changes and modify the research design and methods to best meet overall research goals. The difficulties were also documented and became relevant data, providing yet another insight into the lives of the adult learners and literacy programs.

5 For examples of this type of indepth ethnographic case study of adult learners, read the works of Hannah Fingeret (1997) Sheryl Gowan (1994) and Juliet Marrifield (1994).

The Research Context and Students

The *Literacy, Welfare and Work* case study takes place in Brandon, Manitoba: the second largest city in the province (approximately 40,000 people), located in the heart of the Canadian prairies. Brandon's economic base is agricultural, with many related industries and services. A major boom to Brandon's population and economy is expected with the arrival of the Maple Leaf Foods pork processing plant in 1999. Currently however, unemployment rates in the Wheat City remain relatively high in relationship to the rest of the province. For example, the March issue of the local HRDC Labour Market Review estimated Brandon's unadjusted unemployment rate at 9.4%, compared to 6.3% for Winnipeg and 6.2% for the whole of Manitoba.[6]

The site for this year's case study was the Literacy Centre[7]. The Centre offers a number of programs, including adult literacy, computer classes, and parenting programs. A small group of seven literacy students from the Literacy Centre Adult Up-grading program participated in the case study.

The students who volunteered to participate in the study attended an in-depth orientation session, followed by individual and group interviews explaining the research goals and the roles and responsibilities of both the researcher and participants. Nine people originally applied. One was screened out and a second left the literacy program when her Employment Insurance benefits (EI) ran out and her band did not sponsor her for further studies.

An attempt was made to have the target group reflect a range of ages, literacy levels, family status, racial background (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal), and gender[8] Four men and 3 women participated in the study. All of them were in receipt of some form of funding, either band sponsorship (4 participants),[9] Employment Insurance (1 participant) or Provincial Income Assistance (2 participants). They ranged in age from early '20's to their '40's. The most prominent age range was 35 to 39 years of age. Five of the participants are of First Nation descent. Two are white males. One participant is single, while the remaining six are either married or in a common-law relationship, single parents, or divorced with children. Learner levels ranged from Level 1 to level 4.[10] Most of the participants (5) were not required to look for work as a requirement of their funding. These numbers likely reflect the fact that most of the participants were band-funded and were not required to look for work while attending school.

6 These Labour Force Survey estimates from Statistics Canada fluctuate. In December '97. for example, the unemployment rate in Brandon was 7.6% compared with a rate of 5.8% for Manitoba. In June, '98 Brandon's unemployment rate was 6.7% compared with Manitoba's overall unemployment rate of 5.7%. (Source: Human Resources Development Canada "Brandon Dauphin Labour Market Review). Stats Canada's margin of error is 2.5%, which would still place the Brandon unemployment rates higher than the provincial norm.

7 The name of the literacy program has been changed to protect the identities of case study participants.

8 Band sponsorship refers to funding for First Nations people, accessed through their reserve and/or Tribal Council.

9 For a complete break-down of students demographics, refer to Appendix A.

10 A description of literacy levels can be found in Appendix B.

When asked why they were enrolled in a literacy program, most students stated the need to improve their level of education, and get a job. One participant was specific about the *kind* of literacy he was hoping to achieve: to get his Class 3 driver's license). Equally important to the students however, was the issue of self-esteem and dignity that comes with an education.

- *"I'm in literacy because I want to find a job; to give my kids a better life; and so the world can see me as normal."*
- *"I'm taking adult upgrading so that I can move on with my life, do things for myself, and grow up with some dignity".*
- *"I want to finish my Grade 12, bring up my self-esteem, and find a good job.That's why I'm here."*

- *"I'm in literacy because I want to find a job; to give my kids a better life; and so the world can see me a normal."*

Their reasons for wanting to participate in the *LWW* study also varied, but a common theme was the desire to tell their stories and to help themselves and others in the process. This was reiterated by one of the literacy instructors in the Literacy Centre program, who saw the students' participation as a form of "healing process" for them:

> *"Actually, all of them are needing some kind of healing. All of them have issues to deal with. I think they are using the research as a tool in their own healing. They have one-on-one confidentiality with you (the researcher) and anonymity."*

- *"I think this (study) is important because I can help people by telling them what helped me."*

Students:

- *"I want to be involved in this study because I think it would be good for myself and others to speak out, what they really think about school and welfare."*
- *"I want to help other get help that's needed, and to get into grassroots projects (like this one) in the community."*
- *"I think this (study) is important because I can help people by telling them what helped me."*
- *"I think the students need to get involved with this research"*

As previously mentioned, the interviews followed a basic chronological format. Open-ended questions were posed about various periods in participants' lives, eliciting information that was grouped into themes. The information was then compared with the experiences and perceptions of the group as a whole, in focus group session that took place toward the end of the project. In addition, this information was cross-checked with the results of focus group interviews that took place the previous year, in the *Preliminary Study*.

Upon completion of the interviews in June, 1998, the students were given a copy of their story and, together with the researcher, completed several revisions before they decided on the final draft to be used in this report. Names and some other information (place names, etc.) have been changed to protect the students' identities.

The following is a brief introduction to the students and their stories:

Wolf is a single white male in his early 30's who is on Provincial Social Assistance. He is working at a Level 1/2.

Dale, another white male on assistance, is 37 years old and is divorced with children. Dale has been in the literacy program for seven years and is a Level 2/3 learner.

Bonnie is an Aboriginal woman in her early 40's. She was funded by EI. She has grown children and is a grandmother. Bonnie is a Level 3/4 learner.

Gordon is a 25 year old Aboriginal man who is separated with several small children. He is band-sponsored and is a Level 2 learner. This was his 2nd year in literacy at the Literacy Centre.

Leslie is an Aboriginal woman in her early 30's and a single mother. She is a level 2-3 learner. Leslie was on welfare until January, and then received band-sponsorship until June, when the interviews were completed.

Tyler is an Aboriginal male in his early 20's who lives in a common-law relationship and has a young child. He has attended the Literacy Centre program for 1 year and is a level 3/4 learner. Tyler receives sponsorship from his band.

Candace is an Aboriginal woman in her mid-30's. She is a Level 3 learner. Candace lives in a common-law relationship and has two children.

Life Histories

This section highlights results of the case study research, using direct quotes from student interviews, as well as observations, readings and secondary interviews conducted during this phase of the study. For the purpose of this report, some quotes were combined, edited and/or taken out of chronological sequence in order to highlight a particular point. The life histories are included, in their entirety, in a supplementary document entitled. *Literacy, Welfare & Work: Student Stories (contact author for details)*

Childhood/Family Life

"I don't have many memories of those years. What I saw when I was little... all those parties and having to step over drunk people and not getting enough sleep... My parents weren't a barrier to me getting an education. They just weren't there for me."

The interviews began by asking students about their early years, in order to gain an understanding of the forces that shaped their lives and, in particular, their school experiences. Of the seven case study participants only one, Tyler, described his childhood as happy:

> *"I was born in central Manitoba, near Lake Winnipeg. Home is my reserve and I like it there; especially across the river where I live. It's quiet there - lots of room to go for a walk. Sometimes you can see a bear, fox, coyotes. I lived with my grandparents since I was 18 months old... I've got lots of memories of childhood - all good."*

While Dale had a supportive extended family, his experience of growing up in a single parent household in rural Manitoba was at times stressful for him:

> *"I had no family life without a father. My father didn't want nothing to do with me, because I have a learning disability. And back then it was like mental illness... Back in the 60s when I was born, if you grew up with a single parent that wasn't like it is today. I got teased and I used to fight a lot."*

The remaining students spoke of having difficult, even abusive, childhoods. Many tried to "block out" these early memories. They also described the fear of violence and the general lack of structure in their lives.

> Leslie: *"Most of my life up until now has been negative. I'm just getting started with the good stuff. I don't have many memories of those years. What I saw when I was little... all those parties and having to step over drunk people and not getting enough sleep... My parents weren't a barrier to me getting an education. They just weren't there for me. They didn't get in the way or anything. They just weren't there. I had no guidance and I started to hang out with the wrong groups."*

Physical and sexual abuse were prevalent among the majority of students who were interviewed. Most are aware they were. The actual numbers of abuse victims who end up in literacy classrooms is still not known. What *is* known however is that childhood experiences of violence can have life-long impacts on learning:

> *Those who grew up in violent and chaotic homes may have little experience of seeing regular efforts lead to results. As children, such learners are unlikely to have been given the support or space to work at learning something regularly, or to do homework regularly and see the results of their own persistence.*
> *("But I'm Not A Therapist." Discussion Paper. Jenny Horseman 12/22/97)*

Bonnie: *"I didn't have a childhood back then because we were always moving. I can't remember us having get togethers for Christmas and that. Its as if my mind is blocked from that. All I remember is going to school and every time my Dad came,the next thing I knew we were moving. Now I think she (my Mom) was trying to move away from him. When my Dad came home,he drank and my Mom told us kids to hide outside. I think she was scared of him. My Mom used to beat me, or at least threaten to. The other thing I remember was that I was molested by a friend of my Dad's when I was about grade 2 or so. I wasn't treated right when I was little. Maybe that's why I blocked alot of my childhood out."*

"I didn't like the way I was growing up. It didn't make me feel good inside. Its like alot of walls that build up and you're in the middle."

Gordon: *"As a kid I was sexually abused from the age of 15. I guess that had an effect on my life. It took away my childhood. I never learned how to love. I grew up a bitter person. And I didn't like the way I was growing up. It didn't make me feel good inside. Its like alot of walls that build up and you're in the middle."*

"I had broken arms, broken legs that were healed not the right way, but I was able to move around. I know it sounds so unreal; so unbelievable. But that's what happened to me."

Candace: *"It was awful. From the time as far as I could remember. I remember falling from a stairway in the first foster home and falling from a bunk bed and things like that, but it was people that did that to me. ...I had broken arms, broken legs that were healed not the right way, but I was able to move around. I know it sounds so unreal; so unbelievable. But that's what happened to me. Then it was - I don't know - jumping from one abuse to another. Physical abuse was still there too. But sexual abuse started and then it went on and on for years and years. I just didn't tell anybody because it was always on my mind: 'It's your fault'."*

"When you've been sexually abused, it wrecks you. You shut down. Its always there; always with you. You can never forget."

Wolf: *"I was screwed up when I was a kid because I couldn't become a kid. I couldn't become a teenager - I had to become an adult before I was even a year old. I had to become an adult and take all that pain and suffering. From 6 months 'til I was 21 years old I was getting sexually abused two to three times a day every day and it wasn't nice. So that's why I've got a big chip on my shoulder. I spent 6 1/2 years with one foster parent - and just from him alone - what he did from the day I got there to the day I left... he sexually abused me. He beat the snot out of me. Let his kids beat me up. I took a lot of punishment from a lot of people. When you've been sexually abused, it wrecks you. You shut down. Its always there; always with you. You can never forget."*

School Years

School experiences were also negative for most of the students. Lacking necessary guidance and structure from their home environments, many of these students also suffered abuse, violence, or racism when they went to school. A number of them mentioned moving from place to place and never having a sense of stability as a child. Poverty also played a significant role in their school experience. Several talked about coming to school improperly fed or clothed. Two of the students referred to a lack of available supports for their learning disabilities, and of being streamed into vocational programs without an academic component. Alcohol and drugs began to play a role in several participants' lives, and the three women in the study became pregnant when they were still teenagers. All of the case study participants dropped out of school before completing grade 12. One instructor referred to these negative experiences as *"school house damage"*:

"You learn lots when you are a teacher. When students share their life stories you see the extent of the school house damage they have suffered."

Instructor: *"You learn lots when you are a teacher. When students share their life stories you see the extent of the school house damage they have suffered. For example, if you speak out of turn you are punished. All kinds of things. I had an older woman in my class once who curled up into a little ball at her desk when she started to talk out loud and share her story. All her life she had been ignored and literally shut away in a closet because she was different; because she was considered a slow learner."*

"I didn't have a time to come home, when I had to go to school, eat, or anything. I went to elementary school at that time, but not regularly. There was just no structure in my life."

When asked about their school experience, and *why they dropped out* the students relayed these stories:

Dale: *"When you're a kid, if you're different, whether fat or whatever, you're the one that gets picked on. If you're a baby they pick on you. I can handle it one on one and I can dish it out as well as receive it - I do that today - it's when you get a group on you and they all swarm on you and you know if you use your fist you're the one who goes to jail because that's an assault, but sometimes that's the only way you can defend yourself. Some people just keep going and going and even if you ignore them they'll keep going until they get you to your breaking point. I couldn't take it no more so I ran away when I was 16 years old. I was in Grade 8."*

Leslie: *"My Mom died when I was about 11 yrs. old, and then I was on my own. Well, I lived with my Dad, but he didn't give me any structure to follow. I didn't have a time to come home, when I had to go to school, eat, or anything. I went to elementary school at that time, but not regularly. There was just no structure in my life.*

"When I was 14 yrs. old I took the bus and went to BC to live with some friends. I didn't go to school at all there. I just stayed home and cooked and cleaned for them. That's also about the time when I started drinking. I moved back to Brandon and went back to school on and off for awhile. I was still in grade 6 when I was 16 years old. I felt too old for the other kids, and I was also too shy to stay. After that, I went up north to work in a camp. I cooked for the guys and earned really good money. That's when I met my son's Dad. I got pregnant and I stopped drinking."

Tyler: *I quit school because I had to help my grandpa work on the farm. I only went to the end of grade 10 and a little bit of grade 11. I was a little over 18 when I left school."*

"Somehow I got to grade 7. I don't know how I got there. They must have just kept passing me because of my age... I didn't complete my school."

"Going to school was no good. I remember in about grade 2 that the teachers were abusing me. They hit me on the head with a ruler because they thought I was cheating, but I wasn't... "

Candace: *"I was going to school for a while... I must have been about 9 or 10 years old and my foster Mom would say 'what is school going to do with you? It's not going to do you any good. I'd rather have you here. Clean up the house' and stuff like that. At times I had to stay home and when I went back to school I couldn't learn because I was so far behind. I used to just fool around then, because I didn't know how to study or learn. She never knew I used to play hooky. That was the escape time that I had. I used to just be in the bush with a friend. It was fun. I liked doing that - it was wrong but it was the only time that I felt safe.*

"Then I turned 14 and I met my husband. I was in grade 7. Somehow I got to grade 7. I don't know how I got there. They must have just kept passing me because of my age... I didn't complete my school because of the abuse I guess - that was the main thing. I quit school. Got pregnant on purpose with my boyfriend and lead to an abusive relationship. I just jumped into another abusive relationship which I thought was normal. But I stayed home anyway. I didn't have to live in the foster home any more."

Bonnie: *"Going to school was no good. I remember in about grade 2 that the teachers were abusing me. They hit me on the head with a ruler because they thought I was cheating, but I wasn't...*

"The kids used to call my Dad a Blackfoot, and me a squaw. They'd tease me because I couldn't pronounce my words right... At that time I was told I couldn't stay in school because I wanted to fight. I think they were just doing it to Native people. I was teased and they would call me names... It sure wasn't a good feeling. It hurt me. Sad. They would call me these names. I would get mad after. That was the only way I knew back then was to get mad to cover my hurt feelings.

"I had to be tough in order to get somewhere I guess. I had to be a mean tough girl. Even though I was hurting inside I didn't know how to reach out. My mum would say - and that's what was in my head - that I was dumb... If I brought the wrong thing she would say 'you should know. You're going to school; you can read'. I don't think I could read properly then too. This was in grade 7. It was like that all my life. If I failed I just got passed on. Nobody took the time. My mum didn't take the time. Those were the barriers that stopped me.

"I just got tired of being put down. Called stupid and dumb. That's when I said I'd had it. I went home and told my mum 'I'm not going back to that school and she said 'why?'. I said 'I've had enough of being put down and called down'. There was nothing wrong with being in that classroom. To me it was like streaming. We were at different levels. It didn't bother me but what bothered me was the people putting us down - we were trying to learn. My dad told me that's how that school always was, even when he was there. He went till grade 6 then dropped out. He encouraged me to go back. I went back for one week - the same thing happened. I dropped out then a couple of weeks after that one of the counselors from the school came and asked me why I wasn't in school. I said I don't attend a school like that.

"I went back to school again for awhile in Brandon. When I was in grade 9 they had to take me to the office and give me the strap because I had got into a fight about 3 times. I didn't like school and I couldn't like it because nobody gave me the help there that I needed to know. So it was tough back then. I must have had one good teacher there because I remember that I know how to multiply, division - it's all in there. But back then I had no

history - I wasn't taught right - they didn't take the time. Like they have history, and science but I don't know anything about that. I started drinking when I was about 13 years old. I got kicked out in Grade 9 for fighting. Then I went to live in a foster home and I got pregnant when I was around 16."

Gordon: *"I liked school at first. I did fail grade 2 'cause I had some trouble with reading, but then I skipped grade 4. I was catching on and getting A's and A+'s. I was at the head of my class". In Grade 5 I started slacking off again and had to do it over.*

"I went to about grade 8 on the reserve and then went to Winnipeg and did my grade 9. I lived with my foster parent there. I stayed at one school for 3 weeks and then transferred to another, but I dropped out about 4 months later.

"When I came to school in Brandon there was quite a bit of racism. I was called Indian. I had no feelings. One guy kept doing that to me. Called me savage - go back to your wigwam."

"Then I went back to the reserve to do grade 10. When I went back there I didn't get help from my teachers and I fell behind in work. I tried to get extra help but they wouldn't give it to me. They told me I was having trouble and couldn't keep up with the rest of the class. That's when they put me in that special class. There were only 8 of us in there. The teacher was ok. We got individual attention. But I quit going because people put you down all the time when they went past the class. I got tired of listening to that.

"My grade 10 teacher used to always put me down. I don't know if he had something against me. He helped the other students out no problem and would walk them through the questions. Then I'd go and ask him and he said 'you know how to do it - go and sit down.' I told him 'you know you're always treating me like this. It's people like you that make people like me drop out.' Because I didn't want to be there. He said 'People like you shouldn't waste my time.'

"I faced quite a few barriers. I never had a chance to stay in one school. I was always moving all over the place. Most of the time I spent in the principle's office. I would pick fights with students to see what they're like... I had problems with a lot of teachers because of my disabilities."

"I remember (another) teacher on the reserve. She would call me down. I remember one time - because I couldn't get an answer right she said 'you Indians are all stupid'. When I came to school in Brandon there was quite a bit of racism. I was called Indian. I had no feelings. One guy kept doing that to me. Called me savage - go back to your wigwam. Or 'my dog is missing - an Indian ate my dog'. Finally I went up to him and said 'I'm tired of you putting me down and saying I have no feelings. I have just as much feelings as you do'. He said 'savages don't have feelings'. I just smacked him. Then his friends punched me and I started bleeding and he was bleeding too and I said 'see I bleed too just like you do'. And I made them realise from that point on. After that they started talking to me and started hanging around me. He told me he was sorry that he called me all those names. We're still friends and we laugh about the day we slapped each other at school."

Wolf: *"I faced quite a few barriers. I never had a chance to stay in one school. I was always moving all over the place. Most of the time I spent in the principle's office. I would pick fights with students to see what they're like... I had problems with a lot of teachers because of my disabilities. One of my problems was I was a slow learner - stuff like that. When I was going to school they didn't know what disabilities were. They thought a student was just a student. My last years in school I was in an OS class. That's the lowest possible grade you can go through school...OS is the bottom. It is strictly for mentally handicapped and disabled people. All they teach you in there is just basic shit."*

It seems that **poverty-related issues** - food insecurity, lack of sufficient clothing, etc. -played a definite role in most of the case study participants' early years and school experience. According to Benjamin Levin, of the University of Manitoba Faculty of Education, the effects of poverty on education are profound, affecting virtually every aspect of a person's life and ability to learn:

"The evidence in Canadian classrooms is overwhelming. Students from economically poor backgrounds are:

- *substantially less likely to be successful in school;*
- *significantly more likely to be below grade-level in academic skills;*
- *more likely to be kept back a grade in elementary school;*
- *more likely to be placed in special education classes;*
- *more likely to be in lower-track programs in secondary schools.*

Poverty manifests itself in a variety of ways. Children who live in poverty are more likely to have an unstable home environment where stimulation and incentives for learning are either affordable, inaccessible or unthought of. They will come to school with less background in the kinds of things which schools teach and value - reading, working in groups and obeying rules of institutions. They are more likely to come to class hungry and to be preoccupied with concerns other than those which schools out in front of them. But poor students are also penalized because their experience is different from that of the curriculum and the teachers. Things which students from poor families may know about, or are able to do, are not given any value in schools. Thus, students may have greater difficulty in doing what the schools want, while at the same time their own knowledge and beliefs are devalued." [11]

"How about going to school with no shoes on; shorts in the middle of winter and a T shirt? That's all I wore. Didn't have a jacket. Didn't have any boots."

The case study participants told stories about the difficulties they faced growing up poor. The following is an exchange that took place in the focus group interview:

JS: "Did anybody have financial difficulties going to school?"

Bonnie: *"I remember what it was like when it was ice cream day and mom couldn't afford to buy me ice cream - or hot dog day. Or a pair or shoes.To this day I still feel like the black sheep of the family. When other kids get stuff and I don't. I can remember because my mum would let me do all the work and not the others. I remember going to school and my shoes would be old."*

Wolf: *"How about going to school with no shoes on; shorts in the middle of winter and a T shirt? That's all I wore. Didn't have a jacket. Didn't have any boots. My mother was a big time alcoholic and so was my step father. They didn't really care about me but when it came to my younger brothers they had clothes.*

Dale: *"I grew up on welfare. The other kids teased me but it didn't bother me because they knew how far they could push me.They knew what would happen if they pushed me and if I got mad they would leave me alone. My mum had polio so she couldn't work or anything so I had to do all the housework. Back then guys didn't do housework..."*

11 "The Effects of Poverty on Education" by Benjamin Levin in *Specifics*, a newsletter of the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg. Winter, 1991/92

Leslie: *"I didn't know anything about money. I remember going to school without having lunch though."*

Bonnie: *"I can't remember. Just bad stuff."*

Wolf: *"Everyday I went to school without lunch. Before I started living with my grandmother. My past is really a rough one. I had troubles in school because of it."*

"My family supported me... I was struggling with school work. But my mum wouldn't let me throw it away."

In individual and group interviews, participants were also asked to reflect on any **positive experiences with school,** including supportive teachers, family members, etc. Several students confirmed that they had some good support systems in place while going to school. Others could not recall any positive supports. Here again is an excerpt from the focus group interview:

"I always had family support there too.There were times when I'd quit they would talk me into going back to school. Probably the teachers too."

Dale: *"My family supported me... I was struggling with school work. But my mum wouldn't let me throw it away. She'd sit me in the chair and say you'd better do it or I'll tie you to the chair and you'll do it. Sounds cruel, but my mum had a learning disability like I do and so she wanted me to better than she did. Like I want for my kids."*

Gordon: *"Studying helped me a lot. I always had family support there too.There were times when I'd quit they would talk me into going back to school. Probably the teachers too."*

"When I was going to school I had no support. I was on my own. Didn't matter if I went to school or not. People didn't care."

Tyler: *"It was pretty good going to school there... Mainly I got support from the principle, teachers, family, my aunt - she was a teacher where I went to school.*

Wolf: *"When I was going to school I had no support. I was on my own. Didn't matter if I went to school or not. People didn't care."*

Leslie: *"That's how it was for me too. I didn't have support. If I was going to school I went on my own. There was no one there to tell me that I had to stay in school or go to school."*

Bonnie: *"I didn't have any support. Didn't have it from my mum or my sisters or teachers. It was pretty hard. I remember in grade 2 that it was difficult and I couldn't say words properly and they would tease me so I didn't get support from my classmates or a teacher. I must have had 2 good teachers because I can see how they look in my mind. And I believe those were the two that gave me some kind of support because some of the stuff that I know like the adding and stuff is still there so they must have taught me. I can't remember, but I believe I got some support from them. My mum would just tell me go to school and come back. When my dad was around it was good. He was the only one that would say go to school, come home, do your homework then make supper and go out to play and that. I believe today that if Dad had stuck around I would have got that encouragement from him."*

JS "So was encouragement really important for those of you that had it?"

General agreement.

JS "Do any of you remember a teacher that really stands out and do you want to comment on that?"

Dale: *"For me it was my gym teacher. I'm a sports fanatic, but my mum could never afford it. I wanted to play baseball so badly and he needed players so he approached my mum and said I'll pay if your son wants to play. The only condition is that he attends every practice and every game. I jumped at the chance."*

Bonnie: *"Thank you - my memory is coming back. Someone must have encouraged me too because I won track and field. I was good in grade 5 or 6. I would get blue ribbons. But I don't know which one of the teachers did it."*

Gordon: *"My brother was a counselor and he encouraged me. Then there was a math teacher. Same thing with my gym teacher and the principal. I was always getting into trouble and was sent to the principle's office every day. Sometimes first thing in the morning. He just talked to me and said I was a bright student and he didn't want to see me getting into too much trouble and in the office too much... I had a good relationship with the teachers. There was one teacher I didn't get on with but I liked the teachers and they encouraged me."*

"I had a good relationship with the teachers. There was one teacher I didn't get on with but I liked the teachers and they encouraged me."

Tyler: *"It might have been the gym teacher who encouraged me to do sports. When I did play I was in soccer, floor hockey, football in gym class. He encouraged us to never give up. The principle too I guess and the vice principle."*

JS "Wolf and Leslie, you mention you didn't have any supports. Was there any one person who came close to being supportive of you when you were going to school?"

Leslie: *"No."*

Wolf: *"No."*

Adulthood

When students drop out of school, they are at a much greater risk of being academically, socially, and economically disadvantaged. This combination of a lack of education and personal/employment skills makes it difficult to compete in the labour market, and these lower literate adults frequently end up living well below the poverty line.

Undereducated people are indeed among the poorest members of our society. According to a recent study on literacy and employment, "the risk of living in a household below the low income housing cut-off (LICO) was six times greater for working age adults at level 1 than for those at level 4/5 (47% vs. 8%)".[11] It has also demonstrated that "the likelihood of being on welfare goes up as literacy goes down; conversely, the number of weeks worked during the year, average weekly wage and annual income all rise with literacy levels" (U.S. National Adult Literacy survey. Quoted in D'Amico: 1997, iii).

"Without the education, skills, and personal networks to assist them in obtaining a well-paying job, many lower literate adults are forced to move back and forth between social assistance and seasonal, part-time, and/or low-waged jobs."

Without the education, skills, and personal networks to assist them in obtaining a well-paying job, many lower literate adults are forced to move back and forth between social assistance and working seasonal, part-time, and/or low-waged jobs. While all of the case study participants had some employment experience in the past, none of the jobs they held were stable or well-paying. The desire to break out of this cycle of underemployment propelled most of the students to go back to school. Here is an exchange that took place in the focus group interview:

"The likelihood of being on Welfare goes up as literacy goes down; conversely the number of weeks worked during the year, average weekly wage and annual income all rise with literacy levels." (US National Adult Literacy survey quoted in D'Amico 1997, iii)

> JS *"If I were to ask you the question 'Why did you return to school, and what is the importance of education?' how would you answer that?"*
>
> Leslie: *"I think I started to notice how important education is (because) some of my friends were educated and had good jobs. They influenced me - not by saying anything, but by me watching and listening to them. When you talk with people you don't feel so dumb. Its easier to understand what's happening in the world. Now when I listen to the news I understand more. Education is also important for employment. If you don't have it you're stuck cleaning hotel rooms. You feel better about yourself when you're educated and you can get a higher-paying job."*
>
> Candace: *"To have a life.To live. I don't know - just to keep on living you need an education - to earn a living and the other way. Because most of the people who don't have their education - they're just at home smoking and drinking or things like that. I think it gives you focus. It gave me a life. It keeps me going. Maybe when you asked me what keeps me going - it's school. My education."*
>
> Gordon: *"How I look at it is that we need that education to get anywhere in this world... Today you need education to get a place in this world."*
>
> Bonnie: *"Education is really important and you need a grade 12 now, where before you didn't."*
>
> Tyler: *"The value of education is that you have more knowledge and it will show in the way you talk and act. You can talk about mature things; mature topics... The way I see it, education gives you skills, more to think about. It teaches you what is needed in the work force. I think of it as a need... like life. Its a basic need."*

[11] "The Value of Words: Literacy and Economic Security in Canada", Vivian Shalla and Grant Schellenberg. The Centre for International Statistics, Canadian Council on Social Development. NALD Networks, Summer, 1998, p. 10.

Goals:

Adult literacy students have a variety of reasons for going back to school, both personal, academic, and employment-related. Nowadays, the main goal seems to be preparing for grade 11 or 12, which will enable learners to go on to further training and/or employment. The desire to achieve a grade 12 education also fulfills a personal dream for many people. They want to prove to themselves and their family members that they can "do it". Both instructors and students view literacy as an important first step to achieving these goals.

"Unless you have a grade 12 you've got nothing... Their number one goal is employment. But they all know that employment is in the long term. Its the end. They know there are 2 or 3 steps in between."

Instructor:
"Most of them come in and say 'I need to go to school because I need my grade 12 because I want to go to college' or 'I want to go to university' or 'this is the job I want'. Most of them are very clear...They know when they go out and try to apply for jobs and are told over and over again: 'What do you have to offer?' Unless you have a grade 12 you've got nothing... Their number one goal is employment. But they all know that employment is in the long term. Its the end. They know there are 2 or 3 steps in between. They come in saying they need to get grade 12 in order to get into the Adult Learning Centre. and we say to them: 'What is it you want to do after that?' and then they identify either college training or university training so they can get their job."

"I never got my grade 12, so I wanted to get it. If I wanted to do something other than waitressing, I knew I'd have to get my education."

Former employment counsellor:
"Literacy is now getting people prepared to go to the Adult Learning Centre in order to get their high school (accreditation). And that is a good change as far as I'm concerned... I think everyone should go and try to get a Grade 12 who is entering the work force. It could be helpful now or down the road, and it is an educational level that keeps people in the mainstream, whether they are at home, parenting, or whatever they do."

Dale: *"(My long-term goal) is to get my grade 12. I don't care if I'm 90 years old I want to get my grade 12. My mum was proud of my sister and my sister got a degree. She's proud of me but I know she's proud of my sister. My mum couldn't read or write. She's going back to school now too and I want to be able to graduate the same time one of my daughters does so we can do it together. It's something I always wanted... Right now I'm studying to get my learner's license and then my Class 3 license so that I can become a truck driver. When I finish these I'll concentrate more on my other work: math, spelling, reading, and all that."*

Gordon: *"My goal is to finish Grade 12 and go on to college. I'd like to take small business and mechanics... maybe open up my own garage someday"*

Bonnie: *"I never got my grade 12, so I wanted to get it. If I wanted to do something other than waitressing, I knew I'd have to get my education... I really want to go to school and to strive forward. Even if it takes me 4 or 5 years of schooling to get a good job. I'd also like to tutor others in the future. Be a literacy tutor and help other students... Right now I just take it one step at a time.This has to be done as a slow process; for me anyway. If I go to the top I wouldn't have a foundation to build on because I'd come right back down."*

Wolf: *"I'm trying to get my grade 12. I'm also learning computer skills while I'm here and meeting new people as well. But I try to do the best I can of trying to accomplish my grade 12. I'm trying to prove to myself that I am better than my mother."*

Candace: *"My main goal for now is to get my grade 12.. I don't know if I'll ever finish grade 12 because I am so right down below I don't know what grade I'm working at but I know I have a lot of work ahead of me... It just makes me feel like I'm going to be busy (laughs). That I have to do a lot of work. That I have to do a lot of studying.. But I'm just concentrating on what's in front of me now."*

Tyler: *"I just wanted to do something. I wanted to get my education and start planning for my career - carpentry. I want to get my grade 11 math.Then I can go to community college. That course is 9 months."*

Barriers to returning to school:

Despite the knowledge that education is crucial to one's success in life, those who dropped out of school as children often took many years to return. For them, school carried negative feelings that were hard to overcome. In addition, other demands such as raising children, earning a living, or just surviving day to day took precedence over education. As Bonnie relates: "I played with the idea for a while. It wasn't a decision just like that. It took me about 13 years to put it into action."

Once an adult decides to return to school however, s/he often finds that it is not as simple as it may appear. A number of steps must be taken to obtain permission and secure funding, either from their band, provincial or municipal welfare office, or EI. A very small minority of students are self-supporting. Waiting lists in some literacy programs also affect accessibility to education. Many students must also arrange for childcare and transportation, and organize their family responsibilities to include their own educational plans. Personal problems and poverty-related issues also pose very real barriers to learning.

When asked if they encountered any major barriers to returning to school, six of the seven students listed **funding difficulties** as their main problem. Tyler was the only student who experienced no real sponsorship issues.

"Actually, I was asked if I wanted to go back to school. At that time there wasn't many people that wanted to go, so the band asked me. There wasn't really much to think about. I know for some people it's hard. Trying to raise a family on welfare - so its like go to school or stay home on $75.00 a month, so I chose to go to school."

Band sponsorship varies from reserve to reserve, and depends largely on the education budget established by the individual band and/or Tribal Council and their individual agreements with Indian Affairs. EI benefits normally last only one year, and may or may not include an educational component. Social assistance clients, both provincial and municipal, must complete a personal job plan with their counsellor which, like the EI program, may or may not include education and training.

Student Guidelines for Municipal assistance clients read as follows:

"The Municipality is under no obligation to fund students. This is a privilege that is reserved for serious students who we have determined have no other resource, but have shown strong commitment through school attendance and performance. We would not be considering students who would be long term before graduating." (Source: Student Guidelines. Brandon Municipal Social Assistance Department).

Provincial regulations follow a similar mandate:

> *"General Assistance clients may be assisted to participate in a secondary educational plan if it is likely to lead to self-sufficiency or reduced dependency." (Source: Province of Manitoba 1996 Employment and Income Assistance policy manual. Section 21, p. 2).*

According to the instructors and students in both the *LWW* and the preliminary study, obtaining the right and the means to go back to school depends largely on the discretion of individual case workers, and the assertiveness of the client and their advocates.

Obtaining the right and the means to go back to school depends largely on the discretion of individual case workers, and the assertiveness of the client and their advocates.

Dale: *"(The hardest part) was finding funding. When I first went I went to ACC because I wanted to be a correctional officer, I had to have at least grade 10. I got within a month of completing my grade 10 but they (Provincial building rehab services) cut my funding. I never got along with the counselor so I don't know if he did it on purpose. I had a month left and I could have graduated and my life could be totally different from what it is now. And then I quit for 2 years. Worked. Then I met a literacy instructor at the Literacy Centre. I did it part time - took my work home. She knew that I wanted it bad. I couldn't get funding to go full time so I worked at Westbran here and instructor came and taught every Thursday. Then I thought to hell with all the sponsors and for the last 2 years I've been sponsoring myself. I can work my budget and I'm going to do that until I get my grade 12."*

"I had planned that I wanted that sponsorship and I was going to get it. I've never been like that in my life, but this time I knew that if I was going to get my way I had to be like that. I stayed all day long. Finally they agreed to give me a try for 10 months."

Candace: *"The band sponsors me. I had to fight for it though. I went to my reserve and they turned me down a flat no.They told me my grades were too low so I challenged them. And I just stayed there. I was so disappointed and mad that I just sat there in the office. They were meeting with other students, but I wouldn't move. I said 'I'm not finished with you'. I had planned that I wanted that sponsorship and I was going to get it. I've never been like that in my life, but this time I knew that if I was going to get my way I had to be like that. I stayed all day long. Finally they agreed to give me a try for 10 months."*

Bonnie: *"About 4 years ago I decided I wanted to go to school again. I quit my job and applied for welfare, thinking I could go back to school full time. At first my worker at city welfare said 'No, we'll see'. I found him very threatening. It was so discouraging too. They want you to get somewhere and they tell you you have to get a job. Well how can you get a job when you don't have the skills?*

"I was on city assistance for about 3 months. They put me on a program to learn how to do up resumés and then you have to look for a job right after. I'm glad I went to that program because it showed me how to do a resume, or when I go for a job interview, skills for a job interview - all those skills - and I can look back on it in the future. But I said I want something better. I don't want to waitress. I wanted support from people out there so that I could get on with my life. I needed encouragement so that I could get into school.

"During that time the literacy instructor kept motivating me, telling me that she would still have a spot open for me if I ever decided to come back. I was even more determined because she brought up my self esteem. By listening to her, she gave me the hope and I would go home encouraged. I knew it was where I was going to get someplace. Plus I would talk to other people who were encouraging. They would help me look at the positive part. I had to change my way of thinking and say Ok I'll do this. Even if they

made me run around for a week I'd still do it. I'd humble myself and do it. Like you say, take baby steps. And so eventually I'd get off assistance and off UI and eventually get a job that I like, but it will take time and effort on my part.

"Well I guess I said something (to my welfare worker) because they let me come. But I had to go to school part-time and look for a job at the same time. That's when I asked to go full time at work (6 am until 1pm) and then part time to school (2pm until 5 pm). But I got to a point when I had to quit because I got so tired. I couldn't quit my job so had to quit school. My manager at work said to me 'you should go back to that school you were going to' She could see the difference in my work and so could the customers. They said I was happier and I was able to do my work properly. I was less stressed out. I felt that I was working my way - going somewhere. I also was able to do my math - adding and stuff, and writing. That improved. Because before they would say they couldn't read my writing, but after they'd say 'we can see it more clearly.' Before, I made mistakes on my bills.

"Then the business I worked at closed down and I got laid off. I went on UIC (EI), and that's what I'm on now. My worker was really good. He suggested I go to the Human Resources Opportunity program, but I realised that wasn't where I wanted. I had been there before - that's where I got my typing skills. I said I really want to go to the Literacy Centre. I said I believe I can do more with my life than just waitressing.

"I think I was ready to stick up for myself this time. I asked him if I could go to school and I wanted to go full time. He said 'Don't you think it would be better to go to school part-time and work part time?'. I said 'No. I think you should phone my literacy instructor and talk to her. I've got people supporting me - not financially - but with encouragement, and who believe I can do it, but I need full time'.

"Then all of a sudden I started crying and he gave me a Kleenex and he said 'why are you crying? Don't you think you can do it?' And I looked at him and said 'No I'm crying because I can do it... because all my life I've been trying - going to city welfare, seeing my vocational worker... and all of you say no. I know I can do it and can do better than waitress all my life but I need your support... And it worked out. He said 'OK, you can go.". I was so happy and thanked him for believing in me."

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Related to the funding issue is that of **work expectations:** the requirement placed on manysocial assistance recipients to look for work as a condition of their welfare payments. As previously mentioned, social assistance clients develop a personal job plan with their worker which includes, in some cases, education or training.

According to the Province of Manitoba 1996 Employment and Income Assistance policy manual, *"whenever possible, clients enrolled in an educational program will actively continue to search for work and will accept any reasonable offer of employment... Where there are dependent children, clients are expected to balance child care responsibilities and employment expectations."* (Section 21, p. 2).

While only two candidates in the *LWW* study were currently social assistance clients, most of others had been in the recent past. All of them, with the exception of Dale, had experienced some difficulties with respect to work expectations.

Dale: *"They let me do it my way... I don't really give in. I've had a job counsellor at Provincial since I came to Brandon in 1984. She's tried to change my way of thinking but she's learned that I can only take it for so long and my temper comes out. I know what I want and it's much easier to work with me than try to make me do something I won't be happy doing."*
Wolf: *"I've been going to school but Provincial (welfare) wants me to go and work instead. I can't work right now because of other issues. They want me to have a job. Provincial didn't even want me to go to school at all... They look at us and go 'he can work'. We look big and strong but they don't want to know us on the inside. And that's where we are really hurting the most is on the inside. And you have to put up with a lot of crap just to stay in school and it hasn't been fun."*

Gordon: *"I don't know what it would be like to be on welfare and try to go to school nowadays. I did it one time on City welfare. I did try to go to school and they said either you go to school or work. I said I would go to school. They said: 'You go to school, you can't get welfare'. There's always a catch. I said: "How am I supposed to live?" They said you: 'Look for a job and work part time and go to school part time.' I wanted to go to school full time. And my welfare officer was not very nice. He would say 'whose fault was that?' Like going to school was my fault. And he would put me down, saying: 'I'm not the stupid Indian that dropped out of school."*

"The expectations on these clients is unrealistic for where they're at... If you look at the demands in the labour market for higher technical trained people, education and training is needed to get people into these kinds of jobs, so you need education... Now all of a sudden its 'Go out and get a job', even if its slinging hamburgers."

Before she obtained band sponsorship, Leslie was on provincial assistance. When her child turned 6, she was required to engage in an actively job search. The difficulties she faced obtaining a job and finding childcare are highlighted here:

"I was told by welfare that I had to go and find a job.That was about the summer of 1996 I think. I knew that I had to go out and find a job, 'cause they said when your child was over 6 yrs. you had to or they would cut off some of your money. I did some cleaning for awhile. I got a few jobs on my own with help from a woman at Big Brothers and then I applied to clean Manitoba Housing Units. My employment worker at Welfare also got me a few cleaning jobs too.

"I couldn't go to school 'cause my jobs took up too much time. Another problem I had was that one cleaning job went until 4:00 pm and my son gets home from school at 3:30. By the time I got home, it was already 4:30 pm so he was left alone for an hour or more when I worked. He was only 6 years old at the time, so that worried me alot. I couldn't quit or I would lose my benefits.

"When I went looking for other work I had trouble filling out the application forms. I always told everyone I had a grade 9/10 because I thought I'd never get a job if I told the truth. I only had a grade 6 education. When I finally got the nerve up to tell my worker that I couldn't read the application forms, she agreed to let me go back to school full time. I was always told that if you lied on your application and said you had an education you'd get a job. I always lied on my applications but even then I only got jobs cleaning hotel rooms. I hate that. The pay is bad. You need a grade 12 if you're going to get a better job."

Some Brandon literacy workers have detected both a *decline in the number of social assistance* clients (particularly those on provincial welfare), as well as a *change in the type of student coming through their doors*. The possible reasons for this change are as yet unclear. However, there is concern that modifications to the welfare act have influenced who gets into programs and who does not. As one literacy worker out it:

> *"We no longer have level 1 learners. We have very few level 2 learners. They're either band-sponsored or they're level 3. Most of our learners who are social assistance recipients are deemed unemployable and therefore they can come to our program with no consequences."*

"They look at us and go 'he can work'. We look big and strong but they don't want to know us on the inside."

Several students also remarked on the change in the overall make-up of the literacy class this year:

> *"I remember when we went to school last year there was a lot of students and we came back this year and all the students that were on welfare, they all got pulled. They couldn't come back because they had to look for jobs. That's what gets me. How can you get a well paying job if you don't have the education?"*

"By the time I got home, it was already 4:30 pm so he was left alone for an hour or more when I worked. He was only 6 years old at the time, so that worried me alot. I couldn't quit or I would lose my benefits."

> *Dale: "I think there's only 5 of us that came back. Out of 30."*
>
> *JS: "So where did they go - what are they doing?"*
>
> *Gordon: "I talked to a couple of women that said they wanted to go back to school but the welfare won't let them. They have to go and work."*

There is some concern in the literacy community that literacy education *may not be given adequate consideration* when case plans are being negotiated, and that *insufficient time* is allotted to those students who are allowed to take literacy classes. At a recent Task Force on Impoverishment meeting, the Executive Director of Client Services for Employment and Income Assistance was asked whether clients were being encouraged and supported to pursue literacy education. He reiterated his department's policy in this way: *"Support of further education or training is based on individual assessment and can include literacy training. The personal job plan and assessment is negotiated with the worker and the client as to how the plan may or may not fit within terms of the program."* He went on to say that *"the focus is on education programs which are going to lead clients directly into employment; hopefully one year in duration"*[12]

For some band-sponsored students, time limits are also imposed on adult upgrading. Students sponsored through UCEP (university College Entrance Program) for example, must achieve their Grade 10 to 12 in a period of one to two years which, in many cases, is too short.

This short-term approach has many educators worried. As one instructor stated:

> *"Education is not a 'quick fix'. Its a long, slow process that has to be supported. And I think that's the biggest problem of the counsellors because the policies don't allow them. Their mandate doesn't allow them to do that long-term, steady sort of solid background-building to get a good foundation and then to move on. Its more like: 'Your child is six, you've got 2 years and*

12(Brandon Community Task Force on Impoverishment minutes. May, 1998).

then you're out the door.' What can you do in that time?"

In a conversation with a former case worker, these same concerns about time limits were voiced:

A: *"I feel that for some people they need a longer developmental period to achieve (their goals) because everyone develops at different speeds. Everyone has different strengths, different aptitudes... The expectations on these clients is unrealistic for where they're at... If you look at the demands in the labour market for higher technical trained people, education and training is needed to get people into these kinds of jobs, so you need education... Now all of a sudden its 'Go out and get a job', even if its slinging hamburgers. Employers don't want them. They want sophisticated people who are well-educated, self-confident, have public relations skills, and who can do several things in that restaurant that are highly technical."*
JS: And why do you think those expectations are in place?
A: Get them off the welfare role and clean up the Family Services budget, I guess.

"I remember when we went to school last year there was a lot of students and we came back this year and all the students that were on welfare, they all got pulled. They couldn't come back because they had to look for jobs. That's what gets me. How can you get a well paying job if you don't have the education?"

The one characteristic shared by all of the study participants, and indeed by most adult literacy students is that they are poor. **Poverty** affects virtually every aspect of their lives, and creates or magnifies many of the stresses students cope with every day. Poor housing, health problems, food insecurity, and a lack of transportation, recreation, and childcare are among the many difficulties faced by low income people. According to research conducted by the National Anti-Poverty Organization (NAPO), there is a definite and undeniable link between literacy and poverty:

"Low-income earners and the long-term unemployed, native people, seniors, prisoners, people with disabilities, racial and cultural minorities - all have higher than average rates of both undereducation and poverty. They speak of the difficulties of growing up in poor, disadvantaged homes, of beginning life with few opportunities. They describe how their opportunities dwindled further in schools biased against children from poor families, against people receiving social assistance, against minorities. They pinpoint their main problems today as unemployment, lack of money and inadequate housing - the same problems their families had." (Literacy and Poverty: A View From the Inside. NAPO, 1992, p. 2)

Student stories reveal some of the real pressures they live with every day, and the kinds of stress they bring with them to class. As one B.C literacy worker put it:

"Being poor is exhausting - there are constant difficulties with housing, health, especially food... you can't expect people to concentrate on an empty stomach. I can't overemphasize this. Its not just a case of not having enough money for the bus. These people haven't had breakfast. And its not a case of bad management - there's just not enough money" (in *Literacy and Poverty: A View From the Inside - Literacy Training for Low Income People: Some Issues and Solutions.* NAPO,1992, p. 6)

Inadequate expensive housing - was mentioned by several students as being particularly concern. According to Glen Kruck, Executive Director of the Canadian Mental Health Association (Westman branch), this is a common occurrence in Brandon:

"Provincial shelter allowance rates do not appear to be based on actual costs of housing in Brandon, but rather what the department is willing to pay. This places individuals in a very difficult spot. It means that people are pulling money out of other categories, such as food." (Interview: Sept. 14, 1998).

Food insecurity is an issue that many low income earners face on a daily basis. For adult learners, inadequate or poor quality food can cause difficulties with concentration and the ability to learn properly. The director of Helping Hands Soup Kitchen in Brandon, Susan Woods, has seen a drastic increase in the numbers of people who access the program:

"Our numbers have doubled since last year. In peak periods we've had up to 159 people for our lunch meal. We're seeing more people coming to the city now, more mental health clients (since the closure of the Brandon Mental Health Centre), more seniors and kids, and more part-time, minimum wage earners than ever before. Also, since the Child Tax credit has been deducted from people's welfare cheques, more people on assistance (and their children) are coming to the centre." (Interview: Sept. 11, 1998)

"Being poor is exhausting - there are constant difficulties with housing, health, especially food... you can't expect people to concentrate on an empty stomach. I can't overemphasize this. Its not just a case of not having enough money for the bus. These people haven't had breakfast. And its not a case of bad management - there's just not enough money"
(in *Literacy and Poverty: A View From the Inside - Literacy Training for Low Income People: Some Issues and Solutions.* NAPO,1992, p. 6)

Poverty affects *health* as well. When people are not able to eat well-balanced meals, live in sub-standard housing, and when their stress levels are high they may suffer serious physical and mental health problems:

The impacts of poverty on the health of families is well-documented. Poor families are much more likely to live in over-crowded conditions, experience parental unemployment, disturbed family relationships and parental psychiatric disturbance. Households with the lowest incomes have, on average, the lowest health levels. ("Health Impacts of Social and Economic Conditions: Canadian Public Health Association Board of Directors Discussion Paper: March, 1997. p. 13)

All of the students in the *LWW study* live below the poverty line. Those who are band-sponsored seem to be slightly better off financially, but all of them experience some stress due to their limited financial situation. When asked whether there was anything they lacked, or did without, due to limited finances, all of the students, with the exception of Tyler, indicated they had some financial difficulties:

Tyler: *"Well, its not really tight. We're getting by. We're alright. We started an account for my son after he was born, and when we need something, like bread or something, we sometimes take it from him, but we try to put it back when we can."*

Leslie: *"I feel ok, but I worry sometimes. I know how to budget really well but everything is used up at the end of the month. There isn't alot of money for extras."*

Wolf: *"I get $677 per month from Provincial Assistance.Out of this, $285 is for rent. I pay the other $15 to make up the rest. Its $300/mo. total - incl. utilities. The rest ($392/mo.) covers everything else: food, clothing, transportation, laundry, bowling, cable, cigarettes, telephone. Its not much. I just barely get by... I probably spend about $200/mo. on food. I go to the soup kitchen for meals once a day and sometimes I get a hamper from there, but only when I have to. My bowling fees are $120/mo.; then cable is $30. I pay what I can. I'm*

going to get it disconnected soon. I had to pawn my TV at Christmas, but I don't want to get another one, 'cause then I'd just sit around and watch it, instead of going out and doing things, or homework. I spend about $25 on telephone. Again, I pay what I can. I might get it temporarily disconnected until I can afford it again."

JS: "So that leaves $17/mo. for anything else. Is that right?"

W: "That's about right. Oh, and the water pipes froze in my apartment not too long ago, so I'm buying water. Over Christmas my fridge broke down, so I had to throw out over $100 worth of food. I haven't had a home-cooked meal for over 9 years. I eat canned food mostly, no breakfast, lunch at the soup kitchen, and lots of coffee."

JS: "Is there anything you do without on your budget?"

W: "Going to movies. Go out for supper once in a while. Be able to buy a really nice stereo or a computer or a game system. When you're living on that amount it's not easy. The way the government's going - someone who is on minimum wage is getting more than I get. What I get in a month they get in two weeks."

"They (welfare and other people) expect you to be in touch with the community, you know, get involved with sports and stuff, but how can you, when you have so little money? Its hard."

JS "What about transportation? Are you able to get a bus pass on that?"

W: "It comes out of there. I walk everywhere I go. I haven't been able to afford a new bicycle because of my finances. I don't like going on payment plans."

JS: "What else do you do without or cut back on?"

"When things get tight, I cut back on my food budget."

W: "Well, when things get tight I cut back on my food budget. I don't abuse the system, like some people do. I do the best I can with the money I get (from assistance). I'd like to have a little bit more, maybe $100 to $200 per month so I could budget better. I could buy food, do my laundry (right now I have over $100 worth of laundry sitting at home needing to be done, and no $ to do it with). I also used to play sports (hockey, ringette, swimming, baseball), but I can't afford that now. Bowling has become the only one I can afford, so I have to save the little money I do have for that, and for my drawing. I'm trying to save up for a new ball. I'm working toward qualifying for local and even national tournaments.... They (welfare and other people) expect you to be in touch with the community, you know, get involved with sports and stuff, but how can you when you have so little money? Its hard. "I haven't had new clothes for 8 yrs. Once in a while I buy new jeans, cause my size is difficult to find used. Most of my clothes are from second hand stores. I'd like to buy a computer one day too; put some money down each month and get one. I like to have my apartment looking nice, and comfortable. I'd like to put some wallpaper up, or paneling, but I can't afford it."

JS: "What kind of furniture do you have at home?"

W: (Laughs). "Just a footstool and a bed. I used to have a sofa and chair, but they broke... Everything I have I've found in the garbage, or someone has given to me. A friend from bowling, her family gave me a dresser once. I was real appreciative of that."

Dale: *"I'm on Provincial Assistance. I get $381 a month. My rent is $300. Welfare pays $285 and I pay the extra $15. I got to buy my food and everything else out of the $81 per month left over. My food budget varies. Last*

month I got away with $50 because I stockpiled. This month I'm down to almost nothing, so it could go up again. I go to the soup kitchen for my main meal. They only serve one meal a day, but you can also take out food like vegetables, bread, fruit and stuff. That helps. You know, you have to use it up quickly because it has usually expired. I don't have a phone but I have cable. $83 every 2 months. Then I pay for my bowling which is $20 and I get the Brandon Sun $20.That's about it."

JS: "So, that seems very tight. Do you ever have any money left over at the end of the month?"

D: "This month I have zero. But from Christmas on I've been doing pretty good and it got me through this month. Because I have 2 birthdays this month for my kids, and that's hard, because I try to buy equal presents. My youngest doesn't care but my oldest wants a computer and I say computers aren't cheap. I've gone to the pawn shops and they have second hand."

JS "When you look at your income - is there anything you feel you are lacking? That you wish you could do but you can't."

D: "Furniture. I have a small apartment but I have no counter - very little cupboard space. No table and chairs. My apartment is really very small for a one bedroom.

"I'm grateful for what I get. Its just that... sometimes it isn't enough."

JS "So, would you say that $300 a month is the average cost of housing in Brandon?"

D: "Mine's cheap. Some one bedrooms are $450 and you go to welfare and ask them for more money and they won't give it to you. My girlfriend has found a couple of places but she has to pay $30 or $40 extra, but when welfare say they are going to cover your rent they should cover your rent... There's some good landlords but they have their places up high. The ones that are cheaper like the poverty or slum ones. They don't care. Like my landlord. I have never met him. I just met the caretaker. My bathtub needs a new washer. I can replace it but they won't reimburse me."

JS "How do you get around town? What form of transportation do you use?"

D: "I walk. Or I have a bike to get around in the summer. I used to get the bus, but now I have to pay for my kids. It's $5.25 every time I get on a bus. That's a lot of money. I asked about a family bus pass."

Bonnie: *"There is never alot left over. The money I get only covers basic needs. I get about $50 for personals but it goes for food often, and kotex, etc. Once in awhile, like when I get a GST cheque I sometimes go uptown for something to eat (soup at the mall is 99 cents). I also find different ways to cook. Like, if I buy rice and a chicken I can make it go a long way. I got a hamper at Christmas and there were canned foods there, but I'm not fond of canned vegetables... I shouldn't talk like this. I'm grateful for what I get. Its just that... sometimes it isn't enough. I used to go the the Salvation Army when I was on welfare and got hampers there. The food you got was supposed to last 3 months, but it only lasted about a week."*

JS: "So, do you ever do without things on your budget?"

B: "Its not too bad. Just when I want to do something extra, like going to the movies, or go away for a weekend, stuff like that. I've never had a decent holiday. I've never gone anywhere in my life; just to Dauphin for a weekend once. Even when I worked, I couldn't go away on a trip... I can never save enough money. When I worked I had about $50 per month I could put away, but I never could get enough to go away anywhere.

"When I think of the things I'd like... well, I'd like a VCR. I have grand kids and they'd like to watch movies, I'm sure. I'd like some new furniture. My table is just about broken. I'd also like to get my house painted. I know I should wait until I have a good-paying job and everything, but it would be nice to have a nice-looking home, to make it beautiful.

"Almost everything I have at home has been given to me - blankets, etc. A lady gave them to me years ago; back when people gave without asking. My clothes were given to me by relatives, my Mom, my cousin. I can't really buy things from the 2nd Hand store, 'cause they don't fit right. They're either too big in the waist or too short in the legs. I bought these boots new though. They were on sale. I saved and saved, and when I finally went back they were on sale - I got them for about $35! Once, last year, when I got my income tax money, I went shopping at Walmart with my daughter and got some new clothes. This blouse I have on cost only $5! I have to look for sales now that I'm on a limited income."

JS: "How does it feel to be on a limited income?"

B: "It is stressful when I want to do something and I can't - like going to the movies, or a game, or bowling with my friends. The money I get is only for basic needs, not personal stuff. At times its not often though. I have to borrow 5 bucks here and there, just till my cheque arrives. Its depressing. It gets me down. It takes alot out of me."

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I'm very grateful to be getting the money I do get though. Don't get me wrong. Its just that sometimes I think it should be more. Some of these people, they say they worked hard all their lives, and they've suffered too, going to school and getting a career and all that. I know they've worked hard, but they also had support - financial support from their families. They had parents to back them up. I never had that.

I don't worry so much about money now. I'll get by. There's really nothing I can do about it at this moment.... I'm going to school in order to get a better job .. not a minimum wage job.. and I'm going to work my way out of it. Sometimes I get really worried though: 'What if I end up waitressing again, after all this schooling? That really bothers me. I try not to think about it too much.

Gordon: *Its usually pretty tight at the end of the month. We have to buy clothes, diapers etc. for the kids...I usually stay at the centre for lunch and eat at the soup kitchen.*

Candace: *Yeah, our budget is really tight. I make the money stretch, but sometimes I can't make do. Like right now, I can't get my car out of the garage where its being fixed. And I always shop at second hand stores for bedding*

and whatnot. I never buy new clothes. I make meals last by buying bulk. I sometimes get hampers (fruit, vegetables, donuts). That helps alot. I've been going to the soup kitchen all week too."

JS: Do you ever go without anything?

C: "I don't feel I go without. Its my little boy who goes without. He can't go to the movies, he can't see a hockey game... places where little boys should go."

"I don't feel I go without. Its my little boy who goes without. He can't go to the movies, he can't see a hockey game... places where little boys should go."

"My financial situation has been rough at times. Christmas was really expensive and my car broke down, and my boyfriend's car broke down too. We live way out in the suburbs. I get to school on the bus; or if it's a nice day I'll walk. It takes me 45 minutes to walk.

"My health gives me problems too. I had scoliosis and I'm diabetic and I've got bad arthritis.. sometimes I can't focus my eyes. It's very hard. And at night time I can't sleep because of my hot feet. And if I don't eat every 3-4 hours I start shaking and get really sick and bad headaches... Its hard for me to get a job too because of my health problems. And there's foods for diabetics and that's what I'm expected to eat, but I can't afford them so I try to do the best that I can."

"Its hard to concentrate on doing my work sometimes. Like, I have this problem on my mind. Some days I'd be working. I'd know the work but something would be wrong."

Personal problems also pose barriers to learning for a number of adult learners. Some researchers would say that these problems are related to, or at least made more difficult, due to poverty. The students in the *LWW study* offered clues about some of the issues they carry with them to school, including the effects of divorce and separation, problems raising their children, alcohol abuse, and domestic violence. Despite their determination to succeed, these stressors often get in the way of learning, forming what some students referred to as "blocks":

Instructor:
"Many of the students in my program are not ready for work. They come late to class, have emotional, physical or personal issues. Some are also are experiencing marital problems and lack of stable housing. They have a basic lack of coping mechanisms. They were never taught that. They have a real lack of support, both academic and professional - like counselling and other healing. And they have a lack of knowledge about their own culture and traditions."

Gordon: *"Its hard to concentrate on doing my work sometimes. Like, I have this problem on my mind. Some days I'd be working. I'd know the work but something would be wrong. I couldn't tell the teacher what was really wrong. I'm divorced now and the problems me and my ex wife are going through gets to me. I can see myself giving up and it's stressful. But no matter how stressful it is, I keep pushing myself to go to school. I just keep telling myself I want to get to the end. To finish my school. I know if you mess up on sponsorship it's very hard to get back on to it. It's the only chance I have now.. There are times that the teacher helps me through my stress. She encouraged me to keep going and not let it bother me. She saw how stressful it was for me coming to school and how stressed I was and how tired, and yet I still came.*

"It's very stressful going to school and coming back to a family. It's like having 2 jobs. You go to school then come home and have to look after the family. I do my best to look after my kids and be with them. I love them a lot.

There are times when they go away and I'm sitting by myself and I miss my kids. There are mixed feelings. I'm doing it for them. Finish school, go to college then get a good job so I can look after my family better."

Dale: "It's hard. Especially when I might be reading a story about a family or a child and then sometimes it will take me all day to read a paragraph. Or even you might hear some of the girls talking in class: 'Oh my husband did this or my ex-husband did that' and that hurts me, because I know not all men are like that... It started to get to me real bad, but I want to get my grade 12. I don't care if I'm 90 years old I want to get my grade 12."

"It's hard. Especially when I might be reading a story about a family or a child and then sometimes it will take me all day to read a paragraph."

Candace: "I missed alot of school in December. My youngest son was suspended from school and my uncle died. My eldest son moved back with me and really disrupted things. I feel like I've fallen far behind with everything: housework, school work... everything. I gave up on my own life. I was living someone else's life; focusing on my eldest son's life instead on my own. He was becoming like his Dad: stealing, violent, partying all the time. I finally had to let him go... Yesterday I couldn't concentrate. And a little today. But I just have to keep going. Like, I didn't come to school because I couldn't sleep the night before. I must have gone to sleep about 7 then I got up at 8 o'clock, but I was tired so I didn't feel like coming to school. But then I dragged myself out of bed and I came in the afternoon and I felt a little bit better. I thought: 'I'm going to school - no matter what.' I just got up and got going. I have to. I can't just lay in bed and think... I'm managing to get back to my books again. I almost gave it all up. But, if I gave it up, I'd have nothing. I'd have no home, no way to support my son. And I don't want to be on welfare again, that's for sure!"

"I almost gave it all up. But, if I gave it up, I'd have nothing. I'd have no home, no way to support my son. And I don't want to be on welfare again, that's for sure!"

Supports

Despite the many barriers that students face: funding difficulties, personal issues, and poverty-related concerns, the *LWW* case study participants do have a number of support systems that help them to cope with stress, and continue their education. Most of the students in the study mentioned that the encouragement of family and friends play a prominent role in their educational success. "Doing this for my kids" was cited numerous times by learners. For others, a case worker, counsellor or specifically, a literacy teacher has been very helpful, offering continued encouragement, assistance obtaining funding, or just a listening ear. One or two students spoke about the role that spirituality plays in their lives and their education.

Gordon: "For a while there I was thinking nobody really cared whether I achieved my goal or didn't. But there are a lot of people who say they'd like to see me finish school instead of staying at home and being on welfare. They would rather see me get a scholarship or a diploma to go to university, college. That's what keeps me going.

Spirituality plays a very big part in my life (too). Its made alot of changes in my life. Alot of people say I make a good role model for my generation. There aren't many people like me in my generation. They're too busy drinking, doing drugs. Its a tough road to follow. My people are so lost, because that road is very tough to follow. I was told that, with spirituality, life is easy. Its real simple. Its just us that make life tough. ... When I think of failing in

school, I think to myself: 'Do you want to live the way you were before, on assistance, or do you want to work toward your goal? I always keep that in mind and it always keeps me on my path. I really didn't like it where I was before."

Dale: "For me it's just my family. I've got 4 daughters and they're always asking me 'when are you going to take us for a ride in the truck Dad?' so that motivates me because I made them that promise (to get my Class 3 license), and I've always told them you never break a promise. And I don't like preaching if I don't practice. So that gets me motivated. So I don't forget."

Bonnie: "I try to talk things out with other people, and I'm learning how to deal with conflict in the classroom. And my belief in God helps me too. I started following a spiritual path when I got help for my drinking. I got help from AA and from counsellors, but also through my own spirituality. Now I pray every day and go to church and bible study. It also helps me with my school. I pray in the morning before I go to class, and that helps me to concentrate and to be a better person.

I also got a call from one of the band counsellors when she was in Brandon. She was really nice and supportive, you know? She told me not to worry, that I'd be getting my sponsorship for sure, and that there would even be someone to guide me while I was at school. Someone from the band is going to keep in contact with me and help me out if I need it. That made me feel better to know that someone would be there for me.

I guess I'd just like to thank all the people who have helped me by supporting and encouraging me: like my worker at UI, the Adult Learning Centre, and the teachers at the Literacy Centre, and you too (JS)! Even City and Provincial welfare. Even though they wouldn't let me go to school all those years, they still supported me to live. I was angry at them for not letting me go to school, but they still paid for my rent and food, and I want to think positively about that part.

"You've got to be with people who encourage you. When I got that help from the teacher at the Literacy Centre that time, I knew I could face my fears with courage and take those baby steps to get where I wanted to be.

"I always wished someone would come along who could write a book about my life. then you came along and its being done. It says in the bible: 'Ask and you shall receive.' I've asked for schooling, I've asked for a book to be written about me; I've asked for funding... and its all coming true!"

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Summary of Findings

This Case Study describes the life histories of seven adult learners from Brandon, Manitoba Canada. It is part of a 4-year *Literacy, Welfare & Work* research project, whose goal is to determine the role that literacy plays in employment, within the context of welfare reform. By giving voice to these students' individual and collective experiences, it is hoped that the reader will better understand the world of the adult learner and the web of factors that shape their lives.

It is clear that education enhances employability. Researchers have shown that literacy education offers both personal, social and economic benefits to individuals and society as a whole. However, literacy is not a "quick fix", nor is it the only factor that affects employability. Both *personal and structural barriers to learning and employment* exist for many students, making the transition from welfare to work lengthy and challenging.

The students selected for the case study are unique individuals with their own particular life experiences. Even so, their stories share many common themes. With few exceptions, the learners spoke of *difficult, even traumatic childhoods*. Some grew up with inadequate parental guidance or structure. Poverty, alcoholism, and the fear of violence were a very real part of their lives. Several participants also experienced extreme physical and sexual abuse. These stories are not new to people who work in the field of adult literacy. However, researchers are just beginning to uncover the extent to which adult learners have been impacted by childhood trauma.

The majority of case study participants also had *negative school experiences*. They talked about the effects of racism, vocational streaming, lack of appropriate disability services or curriculum, and inattention or abuse by teachers. Falling behind their peers, many of them turned to violence or alcohol. All of the women in the study became pregnant at a young age. Several students also referred to teachers, principals or others who had a positive impact on their education. Even so, they all dropped out before reaching Grade 12.

As high school drop-outs, the participants then moved between *welfare and low-wage, temporary jobs*. Most of them had children by this time, and lived below the poverty line. A combination of factors, both personal and employment-related, eventually influenced them to make the decision to go back to school. Literacy education was seen as a necessary stepping stone to getting a grade 12, going on to post-secondary education, and/or a better job. Students also spoke of the importance of education for one's self esteem and general life satisfaction.

Going back to school as adults was not easy for most of the case study participants. Internalized fears about school, as well as lack of confidence about their own learning abilities held a number of people back for years. *Access issues* however, (particularly *funding*) were seen to be the biggest barrier for perspective students. Many of them spoke of having to "jump through endless hoops" in order to convince their case worker or band counsellor of their need for up-grading. One woman literally camped out in the office of her worker, refusing to leave, until she was granted sponsorship.

Strict *time limits on educational funding* also posed difficulties for some students. Adults who have been out of school for a long time often take several years to build up their base of knowledge, skills and confidence. This

is particularly true if their lives are stressful in other ways. Many students expressed constant worries about being "cut-off" if they didn't do well, or if their worker felt they were taking too long.

For social assistance clients, *work expectations* also played a role in their ability to access and/or stay in literacy programs. While most of the case study participants were currently exempt from the job-search program (most were band-sponsored or deemed "unemployable"), others had past experience trying to juggle education and job search requirements. Students and literacy workers both remarked on the number of social assistance clients who are no longer in literacy programs, and wondered if this was a result of the tougher employment enhancement measures.

Students referred to a variety of other *personal and poverty-related issues* that get in the way of learning. These included the effects of divorce and separation, memories of childhood sexual abuse, parenting problems, lack of money for food, inadequate housing, transportation, and health problems. When learners are preoccupied with these issues, they find it difficult to concentrate and/or remain in school at all.

With respect to *classroom supports*, several of the students in this study felt that they could use more one-to-one tutoring, better curriculum materials, and a more structured approach to learning. Others liked the informal nature of the classroom, and the ability to learn what they wanted, at their own pace. All of them spoke of the importance of encouragement from family, friends, case workers and instructors to their success with education.

One final observation about the case study participants and their stories is this: they are all *survivors*. Despite their difficult pasts and the daily stress they experience, all of the students demonstrate a strong determination to reach their education and employment goals.

By providing a glimpse into the lives of these seven literacy students, Year II of the Literacy Welfare and Work Study hopes to have more fully contexualized the world of the adult learner. This process continues in Year III, as case study participants proceed with their education and/or employment plans. Their experiences will be checked against those of two other target groups: *graduates of literacy programs* and *individuals who have not been able to access literacy education*. Information on local labour market issues will be explored in more detail in the up-coming phase of the research, as will programming and policy recommendations.

For more information on the

Literacy, Welfare & Work
Longitudinal Research Project

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Appendix A

Case Study Participants: Demographic Information

total count: 7

Gender:	
Males:	4
Females:	3
Ages:	
20-24 yrs.	1
25-29 yrs.	1
30-34 yrs.	1
35-39 yrs.	3
40-44 yrs.	1
Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal:	
Aboriginal:	5
Non-Aboriginal:	2
Income support:	
Provincial:	2
Band:	4
E.I/other:	1
Family status:	
Single:	1
Married/common-law w/ kids:	3
Single parent:	2
Divorced w/ children:	1
Learner level:	
Level 1-2:	1
Level 2:	1
Level 2-3:	2
Level 3:	1
Level 3-4:	2
Completed Job plan w/ counsellor:	
Yes	3
No	4
Work expectations:*	
Yes	1
No	6

* These numbers reflect the students' perceptions of whether there are official work expectations on them at this time. According to the literacy instructors who work with these students however, several of them *are* required to be looking for work as a condition of their assistance, but that the pressure on them is temporarily lessened while they are in literacy programs.

Reasons for taking literacy courses:

- so that I can move on w/my life; do things for myself and grow up with some dignity.
- so I can read and write.
- to finish grade 12; to bring up my self-esteem; to find a good job.
- to get my grade 12; to get a better job that I enjoy; to encourage other people who have been out of school for awhile.
- to find a job (Driver class 3); to give my kids a better life; so the world can see me as normal.
- to help me finish my schooling.
- I want to get my carpentry course once I've finished this course.
- I want to get a higher education.
- To get a grade 10 or 11

Reasons for wanting to participate in study:

- so that I can help people by telling them what helped me.
- I want to be able to find a job and keep a job as long as I possibly can to support my child.
- because I think it would be good for myself and others to speak out, what they really think about school and welfare.
- to make the system better.
- I can get to know myself better; to find out what some of my barriers that I have; so I can move forward.
- I think the students need to get involved with this research.
- I've been through this stuff with city welfare and provincial assistance; I have trying to get a job but people don't want a person with disabilities, low education and also mental problems.
- I want to help others get help that's needed, and to get into grass-roots projects in the community.
- So I can learn new information.

Appendix B

Source: Manitoba Education and Training 1998

Stage One Learners:

If the learner says she or he cannot read at all, can barely sign his or her name, would have difficulty with simple reading or writing tasks, then this learner is most likely a Stage One Learner. People who read at this level are able to read with assistance parts of some of the following kinds of materials: basic banking items, labels (grocery and pharmacy items), signs (street, store, entrance, exit, etc.) and everyday items (menus, Yellow Pages, bills).

Introductory work will focus on: language experience stories, introduction of the alphabet and the notions of print, word recognition activities, photo stories, lisstening to stories on tape, listening to others read, doing assisted reading with a tutor or teacher.

Stage Two Learners:

People reading at this level can do some independent reading; however, they are still very hesitant and uncomfortable with the reading process. They tend to believe that reading should be perfect and often try to figure out every word. If the learner can read some headlines, can write simple sentences (even if these have spelling errors in them), can read basic literacy text, then the learner should be working on the following:

- Developing writing skills - especially writing for a variety of purposes with some beginning ideas of how to organize ideas, inventing spelling for the purposes of writing, learning spelling words from their writing, practising silent reading, doing assisted reading of more difficult texts with other tutors or teachers, developing an understanding of what they are reading, etc.

Stage Three Learners:

People reading at this level can read longer parts of texts, but may be unsure that they have understood the text. They also tend to read quickly, skimming over parts of the text or parts of words which are critical for real understanding of a piece. Stage 3 writers are composing longer passages (one page or more) and are working to organize their ideas clearly into paragraphs.

These learners are people getting reading for college, further training or GED. For the most part, these learners will need the most guidance in: developing a variety of writing skills (e.g. essay writing, proofreading, re-drafting and re-writing, styles of writing), individualized spelling for their own particular needs, reading comprehension, vocabulary development and advanced reading assignments.

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